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# Life Lines

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## Navigating Life's Unexpected Turns: Managing Through the Chaos When Things Change That Are Beyond Your Control

Occasionally, we can find ourselves craving more intrigue and excitement in our lives as a reaction to seemingly boring routines and familiar surroundings. It could be a restless response when our lives move through periods of stability and predictability. However, during the relative calm of these phases of life, people also tend to thrive as there is more certainty, and we feel in control. We can build relationships and confidently work on our goals, focusing on what matters most because of a sense of balance and direction.

But when that certainty is disrupted unexpectedly by changes that affect our lives suddenly and deeply -- like losing a job, facing a health crisis, experiencing housing upheaval, or even a significant transition within your family -- our confidence slips and erodes. These events can shake us to our core. We can feel uncertain, unsteady, unsure, and even afraid of what's to come. And while it's normal to feel overwhelmed, sometimes it can become so all-encompassing that it leads to dread and makes it very difficult for us to see any way forward. The uncertainty created by such significant changes can affect our sense of self and overall well-being.

In this article, we'll explore why unexpected life changes can be complex. We will also share some practical ways to steady yourself when the ground beneath you shifts. While we can't control the changes that come our way, we can learn how to navigate them and acknowledge their emotional effects on our lives. Finding ways to move through them can help you feel more resilient in the face of unpredictability. It's not about avoiding changes but discovering solutions to offer the strength and clarity we need to maintain our mental health.

### **What are life changes, and how do they affect mental health?**

While we may not like changes very much, we all know that change is inevitable. But why do some life changes feel so overwhelming?

Changes in our lives, whether big or small, expected or unexpected, positive or negative, can affect us deeply because they uproot our sense of security and daily routines and often create uncertainty. The unknowns introduced can be stressful and leave us feeling anxious, frustrated, afraid or even sad. These are all natural responses, and in most cases, we can begin to feel more confident as things get sorted and we return to more stability.

Some change comes about from the choices we make. There may be a kind of unspoken expectation that they will just happen as part of the natural direction our lives take. These changes, like finishing our education, starting a job, pursuing additional studies to help build a career, finding a loving partnership or relationship, and starting a family, certainly can introduce tension in our lives. The stress that arises here could be considered motivational and manageable, with some people even describing it as helpful.<sup>1</sup>

### ***What kinds of life changes are out of our control?***

Some life changes are out of our control. It's these kinds of unexpected changes, like:

- A personal health crisis or a loved one's illness,
- Loss of a job that causes you or your family to face an economic downturn that affects your financial stability,
- Moving to a new place, whether it's where you live currently or much further away where you don't have a support network yet,
- Ending a relationship
- Losing a friend or family member
- Experiencing an accident
- Living through a natural disaster or extreme weather events

that can overwhelm us and affect our mental health significantly, making us feel lonelier and more helpless and even sometimes leading us to believe that we can't possibly fix these problems.<sup>2</sup> However, the danger of pushing these feelings aside means that it can lead to more serious conditions such as depression, chronic anxiety and stress.

### ***How do our bodies react to uncontrollable changes?***

Our minds and bodies can go into a state of high alert when we experience uncontrollable change, and we can begin to:

- Feel constantly worried about the unknown and start to ruminate through potential outcomes that may or may not come to pass
- Have trouble sleeping
- Find it challenging to focus and concentrate
- Experience headaches
- Feel fatigued
- Grieve where we mourn the loss of what could have been
- Feel frustrated about our inability to change the current situation
- Feel helplessness, powerless and despair because we cannot influence the outcome of these events

These stress-driven responses can last for days, weeks, months, or years, and continued uncertainty can "lead to a state of imbalance in the body that does not correct itself."<sup>3</sup> It also makes us susceptible to longer-term problems such as heart disease (high heart rate, irregular heart rhythm), high blood pressure, and increased inflammation, which can weaken our body's natural immune responses.<sup>4</sup>

Chronic stressors can even affect the regulation of our circadian rhythm, creating situations that escalate and increase anxiety and worry towards the end of our day, at a time when we should be ready to relax. This phenomenon, known as "sunset anxiety," causes our minds to react to light patterns. Instead of quieting down, anxiety can begin to "creep in." We may reflect on "things you wanted to do and didn't get to – either workwise or recreationally or relationship-wise."<sup>5</sup> With the uncertainty surrounding uncontrollable changes, it's understandable how this can influence our emotions.

### **How to handle and cope with uncontrollable life changes**

We can learn how to handle and use coping skills to counteract the effects these changes have on us. The first thing to consider is understanding and recognizing your natural reaction to these changes and your body's reaction to them. Instead of pushing feelings aside, try to observe them without judgment to help you become more attuned to your emotions and allow you to work through the tough moments. Don't be shy about expressing yourself. You may want to start small by trying to:

- Talk about how you feel with a trusted friend, family member, or therapist.
- Write down your thoughts so that you can untangle them and look for clarity.
- Permit yourself to grieve. Feeling sad or angry about losses you may have experienced because of these uncontrollable changes is okay.

Showing kindness to ourselves allows us room to "focus on controlling [our] controllables" and "let go of a lot of stress and anxiety and misplaced responsibility."<sup>6</sup> Even though we may not be able to change the situation, we can adjust how we respond and build emotional resilience that enables us to "adapt well, learn, and grow from difficult life circumstances."<sup>7</sup>



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### ***What can this look like?***

Small actions are the starting points to help us build resilience and strength over time. They can help us become more consistent in reframing the situation and start shifting our thinking towards recognizing when we feel good when we realize that we can handle uncertainty and start moving forward.

For example, when financial difficulties are causing stress, you could create a simple budget or explore local assistance programs that offer support. It's essential to be realistic in setting goals for yourself. Breaking overwhelming problems down into smaller steps using a checklist can give you a sense of accomplishment when you can complete a task and check it off your list. It's also beneficial to re-establish routines where possible.

### ***Maintaining your Physical Well-Being***

Being in good physical health factors into our ability to manage stress. In fact “diet, exercise and sleep are so deeply intertwined, it is not possible to say that one is more important than the others.”<sup>8</sup> Focusing on eating a balanced diet through good nutrition can help improve your mood. Similarly, staying hydrated helps optimize brain functions. Regular exercise works on reducing stress hormones and boosting endorphins. And getting enough good quality sleep is essential to help with emotional regulation and mental clarity. There are also benefits to re-establishing familiar habits like eating meals at the same time each day or dedicating time to go for a short walk after a meal. These small actions can create a sense of normalcy when your life feels chaotic.

Understanding how mindfulness, mood regulation, and gut health are connected through our parasympathetic nervous system through the vagus nerve can also help. This nerve “acts as an information superhighway to the brain, delivering information

that helps control digestion, heart rate, mood and even the body's inflammation response.”<sup>9</sup> When we can stimulate the vagus nerve through “activities we associate with calmness – things like deep breathing, meditation, [and] massage,” our bodies benefit from increasingly healthy brain function.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The value of social support and being there for someone else***

Connecting with others who understand your challenges can help you feel less alone. However, we can tend to withdraw from social interactions because of the distress created by uncontrollable situations. You can demonstrate caring and take the initiative to show support for someone struggling, which can make a tremendous difference in creating a sense of connection and hope.

- Be available to listen and offer emotional support that validates their feelings without responding with toxic positivity, introducing dismissive comments or falling back on clichés.
- Support them when it comes to using resources such as counselling and therapy, too, so they can work on developing coping tools and boundaries to help them manage their situation's scope. For example, support them when they need to frame situations using tools such as problem-based coping or emotion-based coping.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Problem-based coping***

- Focuses on situations and considers pursuing possible solutions that can remove stressors.

### ***Emotion-based coping***

- Focuses on expressing feelings when circumstances are out of your control and leveraging the best self-care practices you know will make you feel better.





## The importance of adaptability and emotional flexibility

The way you handle uncontrollable life changes can have a big impact on your future well-being. By shifting perspective to build mental strength over time, you can accept the significance of this moment in your life. From there, you can begin to reduce stress by focusing on what you can control and diminish the negative thinking and catastrophizing that can increase the risk of developing mental health challenges like anxiety and depression.

Cognitive restructuring is a cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) technique that encourages you to evaluate your thinking and enhance your ability to adapt instead of responding to situations impulsively by generalizing, focusing on negatives, replaying what you should have done, or trying to reason through a problem using your emotions. When we learn to change our thought patterns, we “develop a greater ability to adapt.”<sup>12</sup>

One example is how we feel increased fear, panic and anxiety while waiting for medical results of tests or receiving treatment when we experience a significant change in our health. Without strong adaptability, we may find it very difficult to prevent ourselves from developing negative thoughts, which in turn can lead us down a path where we become desperate to find relevant information, begin to automatically assume the worst possible outcomes, or even start to bargain with ourselves about how to adjust our lifestyle if the test results turn out fine. It creates a lot of stress. Instead of engaging in such panicked thoughts, with adaptability, we can instead look at the situation from the point of view of being mindful, anchored in the present, and receptive to the idea that “just because something isn’t under your control doesn’t mean it will be bad.”<sup>13</sup>

You can develop greater emotional adaptability and flexibility by:<sup>14</sup>

- Recognizing, understanding, and accepting all your feelings without judgment.
- Considering how others’ emotional responses can influence your own through awareness of your empathy.
- Acknowledging the reality of your circumstances and working towards accepting the situation as it is rather than for how you hoped for it to be.
- Allowing yourself to balance your emotions and actions to avoid extremes and improve your understanding of the situation.

## The long-term benefits of managing change more positively

Life will always be unpredictable because change is an inevitable part of life. Our response to it is within our control. When we become more effective at working through the change, even when the circumstances are unexpected and uncontrollable, we can:

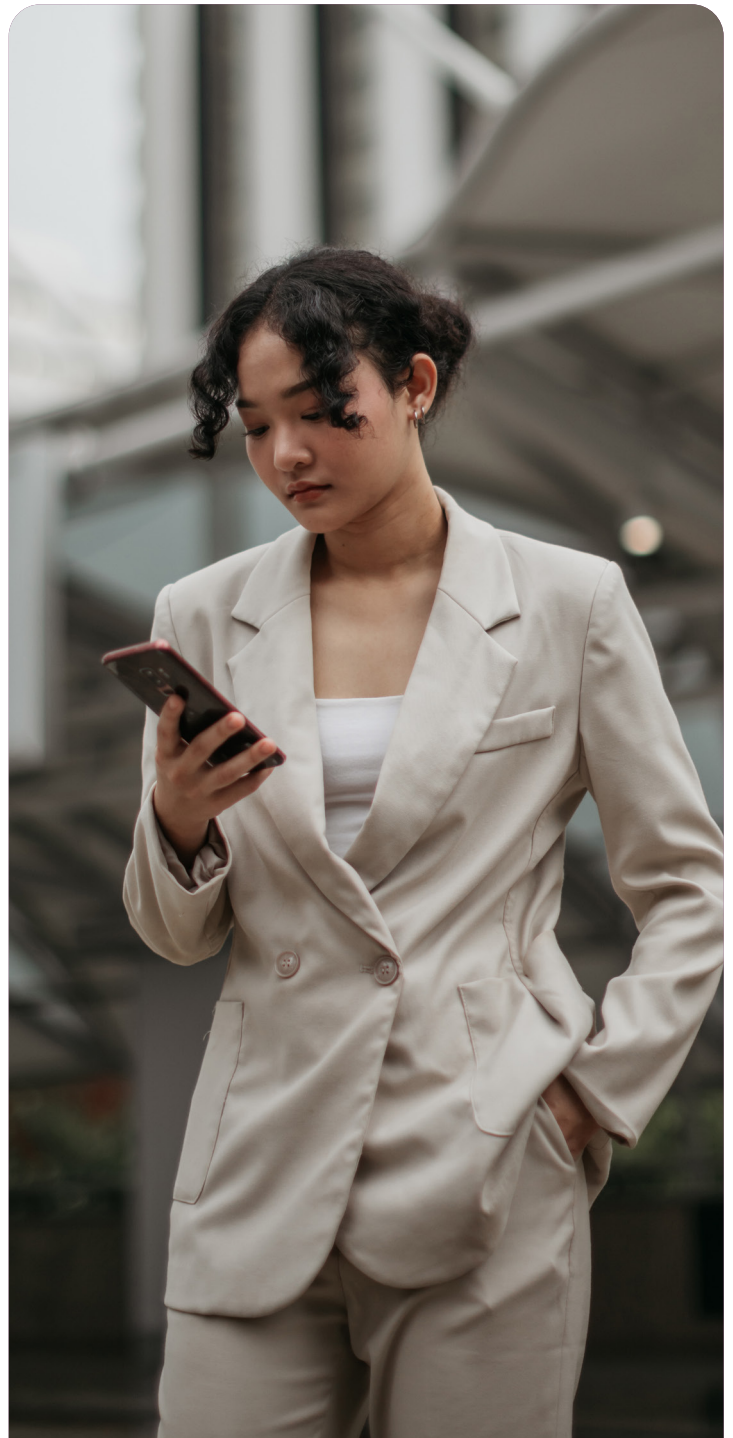
- Improve our overall well-being by finding contentment and peace.
- Lower stress levels and reduce anxiety and tension.
- Operate with more resilience to better handle current and future challenges.

Being open to operating from a position of understanding, leaning on support from friends, family members or professionals when needed, and taking care of ourselves, we can face life changes with courage while maintaining our mental health. You’re capable of handling more than you realize and are never alone. With patience, you can still find a way forward.



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